

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHUL #0112/01 0180803
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 180803Z JAN 08
FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8116
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3726
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 8449
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3861
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI 2424
RHMMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUALSFJ/COMUSJAPAN YOKOTA AB JA
RUACAAA/COMUSKOREA INTEL SEOUL KOR
RHMFIISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR
RHMFIISS/COMUSKOREA SCJS SEOUL KOR
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC//OSD/ISA/EAP//

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000112

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR KN KS

SUBJECT: KEY LEE MYUNG-BAK ADVISERS BELIEVE NEW PRESIDENT
WILL USHER IN A NEW KOREA

Classified By: CDA Bill Stanton. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: At lunch with the Ambassador on January 17, Lee Myung-bak advisers Choi Shee-joong and Hyun In-taek expressed optimism about Korea's future under President-elect Lee Myung-bak's leadership. Choi, a long-time political mentor to Lee and one of his closest advisers, said that this year -- the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the ROK -- would mark a new beginning for Korea and a new beginning for the U.S.-ROK relationship. He predicted that, with Lee as President, Korea would see many improvements, becoming a more modern country that the U.S. Government could trust. Hyun said that the big difference in policy toward North Korea would be Lee's insistence on denuclearization as a precondition for aid. Both advisers expressed confidence that the proposed cabinet restructuring plan that would eliminate the Ministry of Unification (MOU) would pass the National Assembly and that, as a result, policy toward North Korea would be better coordinated. Choi predicted that Lee would be a successful president because he could adapt to new situations with an almost animal-like instinct, and his quick reactions would be reflected in good policies. Choi also predicted that the Grand National Party (GNP) would not split before the April 9 elections, but might do so after the elections if it won too many seats. Hyun said Lee Myung-bak's visit to Washington would come after the Korean market was open to U.S. beef. End Summary.

Visit to DC

12. (C) President-elect Lee Myung-bak's key foreign policy advisor Professor Hyun In-taek told the Ambassador over lunch that Lee had not decided when he would seek a visit to the U.S. but was leaning toward the second or third week in April. Hyun noted a visit to Camp David would be ideal. Senior advisor Choi Shee-joong, one of Lee's oldest political mentors, noted that, because of the April 9 National Assembly election, domestic political concerns had to be weighed when scheduling the visit. The Ambassador said April might be better so Lee could visit the U.S. after U.S. beef imports to Korea had resumed. Hyun said Lee understood the political sensitivity of the beef issue and therefore Lee's visit would come after the Korean market was open to U.S. beef.

¶3. (C) Commenting on the January 21-23 visit to Washington of Presidential Transition Committee envoy Chung Mong-joon to the U.S., the Ambassador said that Chung would not likely meet President Bush. Both Choi and Hyun seemed to take this news in stride, and Choi said that he knew how hard the foreign ministry and Ambassador Lee Tae-sik in Washington were working to secure such a meeting. The Ambassador hinted that Ambassador Lee's efforts might be counterproductive and suggested they save their energy for preparations for Lee Myung-bak's first visit. Choi and Hyun agreed that preparing a successful first summit between Lee and President Bush was more important.

¶4. (C) Choi said that Lee was very open and ready to "click" with President Bush. Since Lee had a wide range of international experience and broader life experience than President Roh, Lee would be in a position to improve Korea-U.S. relations and personal relations with President Bush. At the first summit, the Ambassador said, we would hope to convey our shared commitment to our military alliance as well as express a common position on North Korea and signal our joint support for the KORUS FTA. The summit could be a chance to launch a new, more modern and balanced relationship between Korea and the U.S. Hyun said the summit could send the message that the U.S. recognized ROK as a modern and more equal partner committed to playing a more global role in international affairs.

New Era

¶5. (C) Choi remarked several times that 2008 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Korea and that 60 was a milestone age in Korea. Therefore, he

said, this year could mark a new beginning for Korea and for U.S.-ROK relations that would set the course for the next 60 years. Lee's recent statements on the U.S.-ROK relationship had created an opportunity for the U.S. and the ROK to go beyond their differences and create a new relationship and new partnership. Choi said he hoped that in this upcoming transformation the U.S. would keep in mind the past 60 years and also look to the next 60 years.

Cabinet Restructuring

¶6. (C) Choi said that he expected the transition team proposal to reduce the number of ministries from 18 to 13 and eliminate the Ministry of Unification (MOU) would not face major opposition in the National Assembly. The MOU was a special ministry reflecting the unique situation on the Peninsula but under the current plan, the importance of South-North relations would not decrease. Instead, working within the foreign ministry, North-South relations would be coordinated with other foreign policy. Also, since North-South issues required assistance from all ministries, the merger would in fact break MOU's monopoly on North-South assistance and allow other ministries to contribute to a more integrated policy, Choi said.

North Korea

¶7. (C) Hyun said that the key to Lee's North Korea policy was to ensure denuclearization and then help North Korea attain 3,000 USD per capita GDP. Only when all North Koreans had a TV and a refrigerator, and many had a car, would the North Korean people demand change. Lee therefore would not try to force change in North Korea but allow the DPRK to decide if it wanted progress and the assistance that opening up would bring. Echoing Hyun's remarks, Choi said that the goal would be to denuclearize North Korea and then encourage slow changes. Without denuclearization, nothing was possible, so on that, Choi said, Lee's position was the same

as the U.S. position. By working through the Six Party Talks in close consultation with the U.S. the ROK could attain the long-term goal of improving the lives of the North Korean people.

¶8. (C) The Ambassador noted that Lee's statements that human rights violations in North Korea would not be ignored were well-received. Choi said the most pressing issue was to keep North Koreans from starving. Since Lee had himself experienced hunger in his youth, he knew the suffering North Koreans were experiencing. If North Korea opened up, no more North Koreans would starve to death. Choi said Lee thought it was a basic human right for people to be able to eat.

GNP Prospects

¶9. (C) Choi observed that he was not a member of the GNP and therefore could not give expert analysis of the current internal struggles over party nominations for the National Assembly elections, nonetheless, he expected that the party would stay together. The GNP had enjoyed more than 50 percent public support for over a year, and Lee currently enjoyed overwhelming public support. It would therefore be very difficult for the party to split or for any significant number of lawmakers to leave the party. Some GNP members might join Lee Hoi-chang's party if they thought they would not otherwise receive a nomination, but after a candidate went before the nomination panel, he could not leave the party. Therefore, while some might leave the GNP before the nomination process began, this would not have a significant effect on the results in the election in April. Because Lee was in close consultation with GNP Chairman Kang Jae-sup and with the members of GNP's nomination committee, Choi said he was sure that the nominations would take into account the President-elect's views.

¶10. (C) Historically, Choi pointed out, political parties broke up or reformed just ahead of National Assembly elections. There was too little time this year, however, because all efforts until late February would be focused on getting the Lee administration up and running. Instead, there was a chance that if the GNP won 200 (out of 299 total) seats in April, the party might then split since it would be so big it might not be able to contain internal strife. If, however, the GNP won just over the 150 majority, the party would be forced to stay together to rule the Assembly. Choi said he was confident that the Korean voters would give Lee and the GNP just enough power to do their job. For proper government, a strong opposition party should emerge. Currently, however, voters were still too disappointed in the United New Democratic Party (UNDP), which might precipitate the UNDP's split, Choi thought.

In Lee We Trust?

¶11. (C) Choi confidently said that Lee now had not only the Korean people's trust, but also the trust of the U.S., and he would never let the U.S. down. Nonetheless, because Koreans wanted quick changes and had high expectations, it might be difficult to fulfill people's hopes. Lee's job was to pull the weeds that had sprung up during the last 15 years of government and the results of this effort might not be seen until the next administration. Choi said he was worried Koreans would not understand this.

¶12. (C) Choi also commented that Lee had to remake himself since his past experiences as Seoul Mayor and as a CEO were limited in scope. As president, Lee would need to have a broader mindset and bring in personnel from all sectors of society to lead the country successfully. Lee had an almost animal-like instinct to adapt to changing situations and environments, Choi added, however, his quick reactions would be reflected in good policies. Shedding his bulldozer image, Lee had taken to calling himself a Com-dozer or

computer-bulldozer because he recognized that instead of plowing over problems, he had to adopt the more methodical approach of a computer.

Comment

¶14. (C) Choi said he did not speak for Lee, but at the same time boasted that in the past Lee had sent him to do interviews in his stead because Choi shared so much of the President-elect's thinking. Choi speaks as authoritatively for Lee as anyone other than Lee Sang-deuk, the President-elect's brother, and he brings a more analytical mind than the elder Lee to the process. He refused to give away any secrets, saying if he told them, they would no longer be secret. He noted, however, that Hyun would play a central role on Lee's foreign policy team, perhaps hinting that Hyun could be the first foreign minister.

STANTON